

EMPLOYEE ASSISTANCE PROGRAMME IN THE ROYAL NETHERLANDS MARECHAUSSEE

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Introduction

This presentation will look successively at the tasks of the Royal Marechaussee (abbreviated to KMAR in Dutch), at a number of theoretical views about the Employee Assistance Programme (EAP), and at some of the results of an EAP survey held among Royal Marechaussee personnel. Lastly, the Marechaussee's translation of these results into practice will be presented.

Organisation and tasks of the Royal Marechaussee

The Royal Marechaussee -- also referred to as "The Corps" -- was set up in 1814 and has always carried out both military and civil tasks (Nijssingh, 1996). Together with the Royal Netherlands Navy, Army and Air Force, the Royal Marechaussee forms part of the Dutch armed forces and is thus a police organization with military status. Its objective is, together with other police organizations, to maintain the legal order and to provide assistance to those who need it, as well as to contribute towards the effectiveness of the armed forces. This objective translates into the following tasks.

Contribution to the armed forces

- protection of military objects;
- deployment of investigating officers and assistant public prosecutors for peace tasks and crisis management operations, for example the Civil Police (CIVPOL) in the former Yugoslavia and in Angola.

Maintaining the legal order

- protection of the Royal House;
- police and security tasks at civil aviation premises;
- combating cross-border crime, for example migrant trafficking and trading;
- border control in the form of the inspection of persons at the external borders (seaports and airports);
- Mobile Monitoring of Aliens, which entails random checking of the identity of travelers at the German and Belgian borders;
- provision of support to other police organizations for the purpose of maintaining public order, for example by means of arrest teams, observation teams, or marksmen;
- protection of *De Nederlandsche Bank* (the Central Bank of the Netherlands);
- carrying out the police task with regard to the official residence of the Prime Minister.

The Royal Marechaussee comprises some 4,600 people, of whom 150 are civilians.

Traumatic events

In the course of these duties, personnel may be confronted with traumatic events, such as an accident involving casualties, fatal or otherwise, or a shooting in which someone dies. A disturbing incident can then be regarded as a traumatic event which occurs suddenly and which can evoke a sense of profound helplessness and fear in the person involved, resulting in acute disruption of that person's life.

Similar situations may arise when the armed forces are carrying out peace missions abroad. In this case, personnel receive guidance from professional counselors who are present throughout the mission. What makes the task of the Marechaussee so unique is that such situations can also occur at any time in the Netherlands. Professional counselors are not often present in such cases, and there is a certain reluctance on the part of personnel to turn to a counselor and make use of the support offered.

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Over the past decade, a growing number of EAPs have been implemented in civil organisations with what could be described as trauma-sensitive professions, such as the police, fire brigade and prison service (Carlier, Lamberts and Gersons, 1994). There are various reasons for this development. First of all is the fact that the support available for personnel who had undergone a traumatic experience was woefully inadequate or even non-existent. Many a police officer, after witnessing his first bloody accident, was sent directly to the next incident with the comforting words "Life goes on".

Another important reason is the prevailing macho culture, in which there is no room for talking about feelings concerning a disturbing event. That more attention must be devoted to providing support for officials in trauma-sensitive professions is proved by the fact that approximately 7% suffer aftereffects in the form of Post-Traumatic Stress Syndrome (PTSS), while a police officer, on average, experiences 14 incidents in the course of his career (Carlier et al, 1994).

In many police organisations in the Netherlands, the EAP concentrates on the provision of social support by specially trained fellow police officers. They are accepted by colleagues who have undergone a traumatic experience and thus find it easier to establish contact than would a professional counselor. Besides providing social support, they also play an influential role with regard to the superiors of personnel who have had disturbing experiences. These superiors must be urged to play an active role in dealing with a traumatic event by providing social support and practical, often in the sense of material, support.

As mentioned earlier, the Royal Marechaussee is a police organization with military status. This means that, during missions abroad, the support provided by professional counselors is analogous to that in the rest of the armed forces. In the Netherlands, however, there is insufficient guarantee of such support, and the question arose as to whether the Marechaussee should organize an EAP in the same way as, for example, other police organizations.

Study

To provide an answer to this question, a study was conducted (Tromp Meesters 1995) in the form of a telephone survey among Marechaussee personnel who frequently come into contact with the general public.

Respondents

Of the entire personnel complement of the Royal Marechaussee (4,600), 1,990 officials come into regular, i.e., daily, contact with the public. The sample survey was further stratified according to age and length of service. In total, 523 people were approached and 413 interviews were held. This amounts to a response of 79%.

Procedure

The telephone survey was conducted by professional interviewers from a reputable Dutch organisation. After giving a brief introduction to the survey as well as an assurance of anonymity, the interviewer referred to an article about the EAP which had appeared previously in the Marechaussee information bulletin. The respondent was then asked 30 questions in all. Subject to the type of question, the respondent was asked to reply with "yes", "no", "don't know" ("have you been confronted with shocking events like serious accidents, violence or otherwise threatening situations?"), or with a four-point scale ranging from "certainly not" to "certainly" ("If in the future you are confronted with a shocking event in the course of your duties, do you think you would use the EAP?"), or a ten-point scale which is used universally in Dutch schools, in which 1 is "extremely poor", 6 is "satisfactory" and 10 is "excellent". This scale was used for questions in which, for example, respondents were asked to grade any social support received on previous occasions.

Results

Firstly, respondents were asked whether they had experienced a traumatic event. More than two-thirds of the respondents (69%) answered this question affirmatively. The number of events per respondent averaged out at 5.5. Next, attention was given to the support following an incident that respondents had thus far received from another colleague or that the respondent needed. Seventy percent indicated that they had actually received such support following an incident, while the need for support was somewhat lower, namely 62%. The support received was graded at an average of 7.1. Support from a superior was reported by 32%, while 48% of the respondents indicated that they needed such support. In this case, the support received was given a grade of 7.5. Those respondents who had wanted support but had not received it were asked why, in their opinion, this support had not been forthcoming. One response was as follows:

"I got a reprimand from my superior because I had not reported off duty, instead of his understanding for the fact that I had rushed to the aid of a colleague."

Respondents were asked about the extent to which they regarded colleagues as the appropriate people to provide support. The average grade that emerged was 6.4.

The vast majority (89%) is of the opinion that an EAP will signify an improvement in the conditions of employment in the Royal Marechaussee. The respondents were also asked whether they intended to make use of an EAP. Twenty-five percent said they would "certainly" use it and 50% replied "probably"; 15% said "probably not", and 6% would "certainly not" do so.

In response to the question of whether they would actively participate in the EAP, 11% of the respondents said that they "certainly" would, and 23% thought that they would "probably" apply.

Lastly, respondents were given the opportunity to select a name for the EAP from five options, which took account of double meanings that names or abbreviations could have. In the Dutch language, the abbreviation derived from *Bedrijfs Opvang Team* (the translation of which is Company Assistance Team) means "blunt". Forty-two percent of the respondents opted for the name *Collegiale Ondersteunings Groep* (COG), the translation of which is Colleague Support Group.

Conclusions

It appears that Royal Marechaussee personnel experience an average of 5.5 incidents in the course of their career, as opposed to 14 in the case of a police official (Carlier et al., 1994). Although the former is considerably lower, it would seem that the need for an EAP in the Marechaussee is just as real, partly in view of the fact that some 7% of the personnel suffer a stagnation of the process of dealing with an incident in the form of PTSS. Roughly quantified, this means that approximately 140 members of the Marechaussee's entire executive personnel complement suffer from PTSS. The expectation that an EAP will help to improve personnel care as a whole reinforces the expectation that an EAP will succeed.

The support received up to now from a close colleague exceeds what is actually required. A possible interpretation of this is that there are no expectations regarding the reactions of colleagues following a traumatic incident. This is in contrast to the support from a superior, where the result showed the opposite to be true. This support is nonetheless awarded a higher grade. Personnel also give a relatively low grade for the suitability of a colleague (6.4) assigned with a task in the EAP. The conclusion that can be drawn from this is that the quality of support by colleagues involved in the EAP must be extremely good and that management must play an active role more often in providing social support.

Active participation in the EAP as a colleague wishing to provide support looks assured on the basis of the 11% who said that they would "certainly" take part. This amounts to approximately 200 candidates, although we are aware that this is merely a declaration of intent and that actual participation is usually considerably lower.

The name selected for the project is *Collegiale Ondersteunings Groep* (Colleague Support Group).

Translation into practice

At the beginning of 1995, a start was made on a comprehensive information campaign about the EAP. At the same time, a start was also made on the recruitment of personnel who wished to play an active role in the EAP. There were 120 serious responses in all. Forty of these people were required to undergo psychological selection. This selection concentrates on communicative and didactic skills, motivation, empathic capacity and the ability to communicate on an emotional level. This process ultimately produced fifteen suitable candidates.

These candidates then underwent intensive training for five days in all, during which time PTSS theory was discussed and practical exercises were given in communicative and didactic skills.

They have been operational within the EAP since 1 May 1995. Their task entails:

- informing colleagues and superiors about the repercussions of traumatic experiences and how to cope with them, and about the work methods of the Company Assistance Group;
- providing structural support for colleagues following a traumatic incident by offering a sympathetic ear,

giving advice and, where necessary, offering practical assistance.

In the interests of enhancing their expertise, these personnel are obliged to spend one day every two months attending a meeting for discussions and the exchange of views, and, after completion of an exercise, discuss their findings with a company doctor or a psychologist.

This team has now been functioning for almost eighteen months and has been deployed on approximately two hundred occasions. The incidents ranged from involvement in a fatal shooting to a plane crash in which 32 people were killed.

In general, the reactions to the use of the COG are extremely positive, both on the part of those involved and their superiors. This will, however, be the focus of further study, and implementation is expected to take place after the COG has actually been functioning for a period of two years.

References

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[Back to Table of Contents](#)

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